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Diverse IA deployment factors result in unique Sailor, family experiences

PART 4:

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For more than 8,300 individual augmentee (IA) Sailors who are assigned to “boots on the ground” billets around the world at any given moment – as well their families – the experiences of such non-traditional deployments vary greatly. IA Sailors can be deployed for as little as six months, or as long as 18 months, serving with Army units at one of dozens of locations around the world. Some billets may be administrative in nature, well away from the hardships of the battlefield, while others may be “in the trenches” dealing with dangerous situations every day.

From the expeditionary screening process through combat training, deployment and eventual return to the states, some Sailors find the deployment relatively routine with good communication to loved ones back home as the norm. Others find the deployment far different than what they expected, including extremely restricted access to e-mail or telephone communication with their families.

As a result, many of those family members who have experienced the deployment of husbands or wives before are utilizing Fleet and Family Support Center (FFSC) resources and are joining family readiness groups. The ability to cope with the stresses of war-zone service and length of deployment is unique to every IA Sailor and his or her family, and the ability to connect with other families in similar situations can be gratifying for family members, as well as comforting to those who are deployed.

Many spouses attend the IA Family Discussion Groups at FFSC to have someone to talk to, often forging friendships for the duration of the IA deployment and beyond.

“During each discussion group, I give them 30- to 40-minutes to network,” said Norma Farmer, a life skills educator for the Naval Air Station Oceana FFSC. “I give them time to talk and vent in a safe environment. Often spouses meet in the support group and want to help each other while each other’s spouse is deployed, so they become friends and continue to support each

other outside the group.”

About 25 spouses have attended the discussion groups at Oceana in the past year, many of them accompanied by the deploying service member beforehand because they want to make sure their family is going to be taken care of. But for many IA families, technology is what is making the difference.

“The technology we have today is what’s helping many of them survive. Access to e-mail, web cameras and telephones are much better than the letters that used to be the only method of communication.”

— Norma Farmer

mail, web cameras and telephones are much better than the letters that used to be the only method of communication. But these families are very resilient, and they continue to look for the resources to help get them through. Staying connected and staying busy is important.”

For Master-at-Arms 3rd Class Phillip Berryhill, a member of the Security Department at Naval Air Station Oceana who deployed with a SEAL team to Baghdad, Iraq, from March to September 2008, keeping busy and connected helped him and his wife manage an IA deployment that mostly seemed routine.

“The most challenging part of the deployment was that every day was ‘Monday,’” Berryhill said. “I kept focus by keeping busy and kept in contact with my wife. We were able to talk a couple of times a week on the phone, and we e-mailed every day. And my wife stayed busy working and going to school.”

For other family members like Robyn Monger, communication, or sometimes the lack of, has been one of the biggest factors during

her husband’s deployment. Capt. Paul Monger completed his yearlong IA deployment with Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CTJF-HOA) in Djibouti on Feb. 7.

“The hardest thing about the past year was not knowing if or when we would be able to get a hold of him,” Robyn said. “My daughter was sick and passed out in a store last summer, and all I could do was to send an e-mail and hope it would get through within a day.”

Paul volunteered for the assignment to ensure his family could remain in Hampton Roads long enough for their youngest daughter to graduate from high school. Before deploying in January 2008, Paul and Robyn determined the best way to communicate was through an internet chat program that allowed them to use audio, video and text to communicate.

“When we went to the IA briefs at Fleet and Family, it was great to hear from the spouses who had already gone through it,” Robyn said. “We heard there was no phone, but sometimes he would be able to call through a DSN operator. We were able to chat through our computers. When we were able to talk, it would be 5 p.m. here and 1 a.m. there. It made a difference being able to see him and talk to him.”

Although the time difference was challenging, keeping dad in the loop was important for the family.

“When my older daughter was getting ready for the prom last year,” Robyn recalled, “they were able to see each other and talk through the computer. This is much better than numbering the letters we used to send through the mail, but not as good as my sister’s IA experience.”

“My sister is a Navy reservist who got called up to serve in Afghanistan as an IA and has been back for two years,” Robyn continued. “She was in constant contact with our family back home throughout her deployment. So it really depends on the area you are in that determines what’s available.”

Even though Robyn is seasoned in coping with routine deployments over the years, she admitted the length has not been the easiest to deal with.

“We have done lots of six-month cruises,” Robyn recalled. “We thought a year would be ok. But it’s been long. I’m ready for him to come home.”

Understanding the families of Monger’s group were in the same situation, she used the CTJF-HOA support group to keep in touch with them, especially since many of them were not from the Hampton Roads area as they were reservists called up from around the country.

“Of the 80 IA Sailors who deployed at the same time, only 17 are from the local area,” Robyn said. “We put together a family support group to help each other and get in contact with each other, regardless of location, so everyone could stay informed. People from Second Fleet also kept in touch with us throughout the deployment and helped us prepare for the homecoming.”

But Paul’s return from Africa does not mean the end of involvement in the family readiness group scene for Robyn.

“Since the group is coming back, I have gotten involved with the IA Family Readiness Group for the Expeditionary Combat Readiness

Center, and we have a really active group of ombudsmen going like gangbusters,” Robyn said. “I’m going to stay involved with the group until we have to transfer this summer.”

Robyn said the best way to get through an IA deployment from a family perspective is to get involved. “Find out about the groups that are in your area. The best way to get information is to make sure people know who you are, and how they can get a hold of you. Be proactive, but that doesn’t mean you have to attend every meeting and every function.”

Robyn said her family is looking forward to quiet time. “We are just planning on lying low and giving my 17-year-old some time to spend with her dad as she prepares for graduation. And I will continue to work with the ECRC Family Readiness Group so no one feels left out.”

That is the goal of every player throughout the IA Continuum – from U.S. Fleet Forces Command and ECRC to command ombudsmen and the staff of each FFSC – to ensure that no IA family or IA Sailor is left out, to make sure each and every family member and service member has access to the resources and support they need.

FREE AND INEXPENSIVE WAYS TO STAY BUSY:

MUSEUMS:

The Children’s Museum of Virginia, Portsmouth - 393-5258/8393

The Lightship Museum, Portsmouth - 393-8741

The Portsmouth Naval Shipyard Museum, Portsmouth - 393-8591

Courthouse Galleries Portsmouth - 393-8543

A Key Pass may be purchased for \$9.00 which will cover admission to these four museums for one person (good for 30 days). Call 393-5258 for information.

Air Power Park, Hampton (free) - 727-1163

Atlantic Wildfowl Heritage Museum (free; Virginia Beach) - 437-8432

Battleship Wisconsin (free; berthed at Nauticus) - 322-2988/664-1000

The Casemate Museum, Fort Monroe (free; located in Hampton) - 788-3391

Children’s Museum of Virginia (Portsmouth) - 393-5258

Chrysler Museum, Norfolk (closed Mondays and Tuesdays) - 664-6200

The Hampton Roads Naval Museum (free; located inside Nauticus) - 444-8971

MacArthur Memorial Museum, Norfolk (free; donations accepted) - 441-2965

Mariner’s Museum, Newport News (military discount on admission) - 596-2222

Museum of the Albemarle (free; Elizabeth City, NC) - 252-335-1453

Nauticus, The National Maritime Center Norfolk Waterfront - 664-1000

North Carolina Aquarium, Roanoke Island - 252-473-3493/3494

Old Coast Guard Station, Virginia Beach - 422-1587

Riddick’s Folly (Suffolk; free, donations accepted) - 934-1390

The U.S. Army Transportation Museum, Fort Eustis (free; located in upper Newport News; closed Mondays) - 878-1182

Virginia Air and Space Museum/ Hampton Roads

History Center, Hampton (Family Memberships available) - 727-0900

Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center, Virginia Beach (Family Memberships available) - 385-FISH

Virginia Living Museum, Newport News - 595-1900

Virginia Sports Hall of Fame and Museum, Portsmouth (new facility opened 4/05) - 393-8031

Virginia War Museum, Newport News (military discount on admission) - 247-8523

OTHER PLACES OF INTEREST:

Bluebird Gap Farm, Hampton (open Wed-Sun; free) - 727-6739

Colonial Williamsburg - 1-757-220-7645

(ITT rates available at bases)

Contemporary Art Center of Virginia Virginia Beach - 425-0000

Currituck Sound Ferry (free) - 1-800-BY-FERRY (Option 6)

Gum Tree Farm, Chesapeake - 421-9700

Hoffler Creek Wildlife Preserve, Portsmouth - 686-8684

Jamestown Settlement, Williamsburg - 1-757-253-4838

(ITT rates available at bases)

NASA Langley Research Center, Visitor’s Center, Hampton (now located at the Virginia Air and Space Museum) - 727-0800

Norfolk Botanical Garden - 441-5830/5831

Old Cape Henry Lighthouse Fort Story, Virginia Beach (admission free in uniform) - 22-9421

Taylor Farms Animal Park, Virginia Beach - 427-6461

Virginia Zoological Park, Norfolk - 441-5227/5240

CITY PARKS & RECREATION DEPT.: Chesapeake (Main Office)

382-6411

Hampton - 727-6348

Newport News - 926-1400

Norfolk - 441-2400

Portsmouth - 393-8481

Virginia Beach - 385-0400/1100 Admin.

York County - 890-3500

Also check out Morale, Welfare and Recreation offices for discount tickets, base movie theaters, local beaches and public libraries.

Robyn Monger hugs her husband, Capt. Paul Monger, during the homecoming celebration at Naval Station Norfolk Feb. 7. Paul returned from a yearlong individual augmentee deployment with Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa staff in Djibouti.
Photo by Harry Gerwien / Military Newspapers of Virginia

